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AUTHOR Verhesschen, Piet
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ABSTRACT

New narrative research shares the epistemological presuppositions of the broad current of postfoundationalism. It says that there is no position outside of our language (or our form of life) that allows us to check whether statements we make about reality are true or false. This is, however, not the same as relativism or subjectivism. The acknowledgment of the groundlessness of knowledge does not mean that anything goes or that there are no constraints on what can be said. A narrative account can be seen as an interpretation. The narrative is a construction, and more than one interpretation is possible. How then is the interpretation to be judged? Several authors have proposed possible criteria, but there are limits to the explication of the criteria for judging an interpretation. Ultimately the interpretation must be accepted by a relevant community of researchers. The interpretation must offer sufficient indications that the researchers have done justice to the situation, and this rests on the knowledge of the community of researchers. (Contains 13 references.) (SLD)

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On judging the interpretation (25.38)

by

Piet Verhesschen
Research Assistant

Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Centre for Philosophy of Education
Dekenstraat 2

3000 Leuven
Belgium

TM030221

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Telephone: (+32) 16 32 60 25
Fax: (+32) 16 32 59 35
E-mail: piet.verhesschen@ped.kuleuven.ac.be

On judging the interpretation[1]

Piet Verhesschen
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Centre for Philosophy of education

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According to Casey, one of the features of the new narrative research is the shift away from positivism and thus the rejection of "the idea that knowledge represents exactly the way the world exists outside of human experience and thought" (p.231) As such, in this sense, new narrative research shares the epistemological presuppositions of the broad current of postfoundationalism. In a nutshell, this position comes down to the belief "that there are no foundations of knowledge, no grounds exterior to ourselves that guarantee the truth of our factual claims, and no supra-human warrant for universal truths in the realm of ethics" (Blake, Smeyers, Smith, Standish, 1998). There is no position outside our language (or our form of life to put it in a Wittgensteinian way) that allows us to check whether the statements we make about reality are true or false. In the case of scientific statements, the quest for an ultimate guarantee would not only imply a position outside our language, but also the existence of a method other than the scientific one that can warrant the truth of our statements. This latter view is untenable. Moreover, the explanation of the success of science is, according to Rorty, not to be found in a special relationship of correspondence between the objective reality and science. There is no need for a foundation of science that would provide more certainty than the scientific method itself (Burms, 1994).
But postfoundationalism is not the same as relativism or subjectivism. The acknowledgement of the groundlessness of our knowlegde does not mean that anything goes or that there are no constraints on what can be said.
The intersubjective context precedes the constitution of the subject. We are from the very beginning situated in a form of life, in an intersubjective context and one of the features of this context is the sharing of a common language. This common language is our inevitable starting point. If we make a statement about the world, we cannot but utter the statement in a language that is already bestowed with meaning[2]. Where do these meanings come from? These meanings are not lying out there, waiting to be discovered by us. Meaning is not given. Meaning is constructed. But this construction of meaning is easily misunderstood. It does not mean that we can all construct our private meanings without constraints. Wittgenstein (1953) clearly showed that the position in which it is claimed that each of us can construct her

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[1] I am indebted to Paul Smeyers for his suggestions on an earlier version of this text.

[2] I want to emphasize that my view on language should not be mistaken for an instrumental one although some hardly unavoidable expressions may lead to that conclusion. When for example I say: "I express myself," I don't mean that my utterance is a description of something existing independently of language. In a similar way, meaning is not stored somewhere in our heads waiting to be translated in language. In this case, language would be a vehicle for meaning, an instrument. In my view, meaning and expression, meaning and language are interwoven. The meaning of what we say is dependent of the formulation, of the words we speak. This is different from the surch for an expression that is an accurate translation of something, existing prior to the saying. Rather, we make an utterance, we notice the reaction of the listeners, we have a range of associations and so we can check whether we succeeded in expressing what we wanted to say. So the formulation is constitutive for meaning and not just a translation of meaning.

or his own meanings that we afterwards try to attune with the meanings of others is untenable. Similarly, we cannot collectively create new meaning *ex nihilo*. Meaning is intersubjective in a radical way. This does not mean that we are in some way imprisoned in a limited number of utterances. This view does not exclude change in language. Language changes by the use of it in new contexts. There is a constant evolving stream of language where language is constantly created but never independently of the past (Smeyers, 1998a).

This position has far reaching consequences for the judgement of interpretations.
On the epistemological level it leads to the acknowledgement that the borderline between a research report and fiction is less strong (although it does not completely vanish!) A 'report' or 'to report' has the connotation of a neutral description of reality as it is. But this description is already and inevitably done from a particular perspective. Instead of separate realms there seems to be a continuum with research and fiction at the ends and philosophy somewhere in between. One of the features of this continuum is a growing concern with reality, a growing impact of reality on what can be said. In fiction, the story is invented by the author. And although O' Dea (1994) argues that even in literary narrative writing the truth plays a much more central role than one would expect, there are no limits to the creativity of the author. There are no constraints coming from reality on what she can write. For a interpretative researcher the starting point is a question to be answered or a problem to be solved. Data are needed in order to be able to answer the question. So, although there may be a resemblance between literature and research (for example on the level of the presentation), there is an empirical constraint on what can be said in research. Philosophy can be situated somewhere between literature and research. Philosophical propositions "offer new criteria for the use of certain concepts, and new ways of looking at things" (Smeyers, 1998b).
Philosophy does not want to know reality in a scientific way (or manipulate it in a technical way) nor does it want to recreate it in a literary way. Philosophy wants to offer a reflexive description. What is at stake in philosophy is on the one hand the description of *reality* (in contrast to pure literature) and on the other hand the *description* itself (in contrast with pure science) (Cuypers, 1994).
There are other aspects to distinguish (narrative) research from philosophy or literature dealing with analogous issues. First, as I already mentioned the starting point is a different one. Educational research starts from problems to be solved or questions to be answered. Secondly, the aim is a different one. The aim of literature is aesthetic. The aim of research is the explanation, the understanding or change of a social setting or human acting. This does not mean that the presentation of research findings may not have some literary value. Philosophy in most cases does not aim at explanation or change. Thirdly, the audience is different. Research findings are presented for the scientific community or the practitioners.

A narrative account can be seen as an interpretation. So the narrative is a construction. But more than one interpretation is possible. How do we have to judge the interpretation? Since we gave up the correspondence theory of truth we do not judge an interpretation by looking for a one-to-one-relationship between the interpretation and reality as such, or meaning as it exists independent of our thinking. There is no meaning to be discovered, uncontaminated by the researcher. On the other hand, since in my view postfoundationalism is not the same as relativism or subjectivism, we don't want to accept that each interpretation has the same value as any other.
Several authors give us indications of possible criteria. Jane O' Dea proposes 'authenticity' as the crucial concept, with the connected concepts of 'honesty' and 'truthfulness'.
According to Polkinghorne (1995) "the analytic development of a story from the gathered data involves recursive movement from the data to an emerging thematic plot. … The

development of a plot follows the same principles of understanding that are described by the notion of the hermeneutic circle" (p.16). In writing a narrative interpretation, the researcher not just lists events but the different episodes get a new meaning by their contribution to the development of the plot. It is shown how the elements are part of a coherent whole. As such, "the very act of bringing these happenings into language imposes a higher level of order on them than they have in the flux of everyday experience. The move to narrative configuration extracts a still higher order from the fullness of lived experience " (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.16). Polkinghorne concludes that "the final story must fit the data while at the same time bringing an order and meaningfulness that is not apparent in the data themselves" (p.16).

But is it possible to make a list of necessary contents in order to get an acceptable interpretation? Since I agree with Taylor (1985) when he argues in favour of an interpretative or hermeneutical view on human sciences, I can at least suggest one crucial content. In interpretative research it is acknowledged that human action is based on the meanings that particular contexts, events and situations have for the ones who are involved. If we want to understand human action we must take into account the meaning and the (self-)understanding of those who are involved. There are a number of instruments that allow the researcher to retrieve those meanings such as interviews, the analysis of personal documents like journals, diaries and so on.
O'Dea writes that the narrative researcher is "bound to honour the settings inside which their research stories occur" (p.165), "to honour details and incidents that in fact happened" (p.166) and "to leave room for the irreducible complexity of classroom practice while yet offering penetrating, important insights into teachers' experience of it" (p.167).
All this has a resemblance with the perspicuous representation as proposed by Wittgenstein.

> "This perspicuous representation brings about the understanding which consists precisely in the fact that we "see the connections." Hence the importance of finding *connecting links*." (Wittgenstein, 1979, p.69)

Still according to Wittgenstein, the understanding that is offered must always go back to the understanding of the practitioners. The consequences of this position for educational research are outlined by Paul Smeyers (1998b), Paul Standish (1995) and others. Standish writes: "Understanding these practices cannot be achieved solely through the specialized concepts the researcher shares with colleagues but must involve the ways of speaking internal to the classroom and to the subjects which are taught. ... What can be aimed at is the perspicuous description of a limited part of what is going on in school" (p. 156-157).
On the other hand, it is obvious that there is more than one "best" interpretation in relation to the chosen aim of the interpretation (Van Brakel &Van den Brink, 1988). So, an interpretation must be judged in relation to its aims. Kvale too argues that "some knowledge leads to more effective actions to obtain envisaged goals." Although he does not talk about 'interpretation', this can indeed be a reason to prefer one interpretation to another one. (But the fact that one interpretation leads to more effective actions than the other one, does not mean that the former has to be accepted as true. This would imply the re-introduction of verificationism.)
On the other hand, according to O'Dea (1994) the moral agent has the obligation to render reality precisely and faithfully since "only such a rendering will give one the information one needs to make the right choice" (p.170). It seems as if a perspicuous representation of a limited part of what is going on in school always starts from a question that needs to be answered.

The idea that an interpretation must be judged in relation to its aims has as a consequence that the justification of the goals should also be taken into account. And this is a task for philosophy of education.
In the foregoing it becomes clear that there are limits to the explicitation of the criteria for judging an interpretation. Whether an interpretation is judged as an interesting one is dependent on the interest one has. Since what makes an interesting interpretation also has to do with the evocative power, an important role is played by the way the interpretation is presented. Susan Florio-Ruane puts it rather provocative when she argues that: "Apparently, if science is, in fact, a branch of literature, presentation matters (1991, p.241). Although I don't fully agree with her for the reasons mentioned above, she has a point there.

Ultimately, the interpretation must be accepted by the relevant community of researchers. Therefore, the interpretation should offer them sufficient indications that the researcher has done justice to the situation, to the practitioner. Of course, the interpretation could still be fake but as O'Dea (1994) wrote: "one has to trust in the integrity of the scholar" (p.166). The flaws of one interpretation could only appear in another, richer interpretation. It needs to be emphasised however that it is impossible to do the same research (in the same setting, with the same people concerned) all over again. Since the selfinterpretation, the selfunderstanding of the ones involved has to be taken into account in interpretative research, the subjects and their setting have changed as a result of the inquiry. By the same token, since there is a great impact of the researcher herself during the research process (due to the relationship between researcher and the ones concerned) and in the final stage of writing the research report, the reliability of the findings cannot be increased by allowing another researcher to repeat the whole inquiry. This test for reliability has to stay where it comes from, that is the natural sciences. The community of researchers can only judge whether the interpretation offers them a perspicuous description and they make this judgement on the basis of their knowledge of other interpretations and their familiarity with similar contexts.

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